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Boy Says Lebanese Recruited Him as Car Bomber

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JERUSALEM, April 13 — A 16-year-old Lebanese was captured by Israeli troops hours before he was supposed to get into an explosive-laden car and go on a suicide bombing mission to blow up the Israeli Army headquarters in Lebanon, according to Israeli officials and an account from the youth himself.

The teen-ager, Mohammed Mahmoud Burro, was captured by Israeli soldiers in a raid on a southern Lebanese village on Feb. 23. It is believed to be the first time that a trained suicide car-bomber has been seized alive.

Under questioning by the Israelis and in a separate interview with The New York Times, he has given an account of his life, of his enlistment for the suicide mission and of the people he was working for. If true, his account would provide the first inside look at the motivation of a suicide bomber and the planning and organization behind his operation.

Although there is no independent confirmation of his account, senior Israeli military officials have spent days questioning Mr. Burro, who has curly, light brown hair, has yet to start shaving and looks like any of a thousand Shiite teen-agers walking the streets of West Beirut today. They have also checked many key elements in his narrative through their own covert means, and in each case, they said, they found he was telling the truth or could not have made up what he said.

"We are convinced," said a senior military source, "that his story is true." He added that a formal announcement of his capture and account would be made in Israel on Sunday morning.

Mr. Burro is expected to remain in Israeli custody for some time.

It is unclear whether Mr. Burro's account is typical of those who have been involved in the wave of suicide car bombings in Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East over the last few years. Yet three aspects of his account may have an important bearing on an understanding of the suicide bombing phenomenon.

Not a Devout Moslem

What seems most striking about Mr. Burro's account is that although he is a Shiite Moslem, he comes from a secular family background. He spent his free time not in prayer, he said, but riding his motorcycle and playing pinball. According to his account, he was not a

fanatic who wanted to kill himself in the cause of Islam or anti-Zionism, but was recruited for the suicide mission through another means: blackmail.

Shiite extremist groups in Lebanon and Iran have given the impression that the suicide bomb attacks have been carried out by devoutly religious people eager to become martyrs. Mr. Burro said he was taken to two religious leaders as part of his training for the mission, apparently to instill religious zeal.

Unacquainted With Organizers

Second, Mr. Burro said he did not know beforehand most of the people who recruited him or brought him to the point where the car laden with explosives would be brought to him. His account, if accurate, would seem to reinforce previous speculation that the people who actually drive the suicide cars are carefully recruited from the general public by intelligence officials of Lebanese militias or Middle Eastern Governments. The planning and preparation, it would seem, are carried out by intelligence experts unknown to the driver, and the car is brought to the suicide driver only at the last minute.

Third, Mr. Burro said the men who recruited him were from the Lebanese Shiite militia Amal. This seems note-

worthy because Amal is considered the most moderate and mainstream of the Lebanese Shiite organizations, and while its opposition to the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon is well known, Amal was generally believed to use more conventional means of warfare, leaving the so-called "fanatical" suicide methods to its more extreme rival, the pro-Iranian Party of God.

Mr. Burro's account could indicate that a method of terrorism that once seemed confined to a fanatical fringe may now be emerging as an accepted tool of warfare for more moderate groups and state intelligence organizations.

Ten days ago, at the request of The Times, which had independently learned of Mr. Burro's capture, the Israeli Army approved a 90-minute interview with Mr. Burro in a Tel Aviv office, without any interference but in the presence of military personnel. The interview came at the completion of Mr. Burro's interrogation by the Israelis. On Friday, military censors in Israel released the interview for publication after reading it and deciding that nothing had to be deleted.

Mr. Burro was nervous at the start of the interview, which was conducted entirely in Arabic, but gradually warmed up as time passed and he appeared to speak freely. He is, as Israeli officials put it, "just a kid."

What follows is his account.

Continued

The Enlistment

"I was born in 1969 in the southern suburbs of Beirut," said Mr. Burro. "Our financial conditions at home were not good. I am the middle child. I had two younger sisters, and two older brothers. My father worked as a traffic policeman in the southern suburbs."

Mr. Burro's family lived in a three-room apartment for which his father paid about \$50 a month, he said. Like many poor Shiite youths, Mr. Burro said, he quit school — in the fifth grade — to help support his family.

He said he worked for several years for a telephone company but lost the job last May when fighting closed the business.

After drifting for several months, he said, he was hired by the Civil Defense Brigade of the Shiite militia Amal as a firefighter. Amal is the largest and most powerful Shiite political movement and militia in Lebanon; it controlled Mr. Burro's neighborhood.

Mr. Burro said his work in the Amal Civil Defense Brigade involved "saving people in collapsed buildings" and putting out fires. Because of the breakdown of municipal services in Beirut, such tasks are not performed by the Government, and it is popular work among teen-agers.

A Motorcycle Accident

A few months ago Mr. Burro was riding his motorcycle and had an accident, he said. The incident, he said, eventually led him into his suicide mission.

"I was driving along, and the car in front of me was going very fast," he said. "Suddenly, he slowed down and I ran into him. His rear window broke and some glass landed on me. The driver and I got into an argument over whose fault it was."

In lawless Beirut, accidents are often adjudicated on the spot between the two drivers — the ultimate in no-fault insurance. Frequently the matter is resolved on the basis of who draws a gun first. In this case Mr. Burro was clearly at fault. He knew it was going to cost him. Seeking help, he said, he contacted a man named Abu Hassan, who was the Amal security chief in the southern suburbs.

"Abu Hassan closed the file on the accident," Mr. Burro said. It is not clear what Abu Hassan did, but he got Mr. Burro out of trouble and put him in his debt.

A few months passed. Mr. Burro said he continued his work with Amal. Then another accident happened, this time involving his father.

"My father ran over a young woman with his car," said Mr. Burro. "He injured his head badly and was not the same afterward."

Demand for Compensation

The young woman's parents demanded that the Burro family pay all her medical bills and additional money as compensation, Mr. Burro said.

The accident, he said, left his father in need of an operation; his father had to borrow 13,000 Lebanese pounds — the equivalent of \$750 and an enormous sum for his family — to pay his medical bills. He still needed a second operation for which he had no money. At the same time, the girl's family was pressing them for money.

Mr. Burro said others then went to Abu Hassan and told him about the family's predicament. This was in early February, he said. A few days later, Mr. Burro said, Abu Hassan sent a messenger to him, telling him to come to his office for a talk.

The meeting, Mr. Burro recalled, was a carefully balanced combination of inducements and threats. It went something like this, according to Mr. Burro:

"You know your father had this accident with this girl," Abu Hassan said, "and your financial conditions are not good. It cost a lot of money."

Abu Hassan then began to tell him in detail about the financial situation of his father and how the problems could be resolved.

"We have the power to take care of everything," he said. "Tomorrow your father is going to be fired from his job and your family will have nothing. We have everything in our power. The future of your family is in your hands."

Mr. Burro answered: "What? What are you talking about? How can I help my family?"

"Think About It"

Abu Hassan said: "Well, we are suggesting a suicide mission for you. What do you think about it? Think about it. Remember, the future of your family is in your hands."

Mr. Burro said his first reaction to Abu Hassan's suggestion had been to reject it. He had no interest in being a martyr, he said.

At that point, according to Mr. Burro, Abu Hassan got tough. The youth was told that if he did not agree to the suicide mission, Abu Hassan would cause problems for his father and reopen the file on his motorcycle accident. Abu Hassan also apparently hinted that he was ready to cut off Mr. Burro's only source of income with the Amal civil defense unit.

Mr. Burro made it clear that he had been terrified of Abu Hassan and of what he might do to his father.

"I knew then and there that I would have no choice but to say yes," the youth said. "I knew what would happen if I said no."

Still, Mr. Burro said, he could not bring himself to agree right away. He stalled, he said, and told Abu Hassan that he needed time to think about it. Abu Hassan told him to take a few days, Mr. Burro said.

A 'Very Secret' Conversation

When their talk was over, Abu Hassan informed Mr. Burro that their entire conversation was "very secret" and that he was to tell no one, especially not his parents, Mr. Burro said.

Mr. Burro spent a week and a half thinking the matter over, not telling anyone in his family about it, he said. His father was clearly in a desperate situation.

The one point in the interview at which Mr. Burro became misty-eyed was in talking about his relationship with his father.

"I love my father very much," he said. "His blood is my blood." He added, "My father is like everything for me — like a brother for me."

After a week and a half of thinking about little else, Mr. Burro said, he returned to Abu Hassan's office to give his answer.

"I told him, 'O.K., I accept a suicide mission,'" he said. "The reason I did was financial incentives and because they obligated me. It was not out of any ideology."

After he had agreed to the suicide mission, said Mr. Burro, a very pleased Abu Hassan told him: "We will help your father. We will finish with this problem. We will help him. We will close the file on all of this, and everything will be finished."

Whether Abu Hassan paid anything to the girl's family or simply ordered them to stop pursuing Mr. Burro is not clear. In any event, "the file was closed," Mr. Burro said.

Friends Try to Dissuade Him

While Mr. Burro did not tell his family about his decision, he did tell five of his male friends in the Amal Civil Defense Brigade, he said.

"I told them that they had suggested I go on a suicide mission and that I had agreed," Mr. Burro related to Israeli military sources. "My friends said to me: 'What! Are you crazy?'"

His friends tried to talk him out of it, Mr. Burro said. The prospect of suicide clearly had a stigma to his friends.

Abu Hassan told Mr. Burro that he should not worry so much about the suicide aspect of the mission, the youth said. In fact, Mr. Burro said, Abu Hassan told him he had a "50-50" chance of surviving the car bomb because he would be given a special flak jacket that would protect him. In addition, according to Mr. Burro, Abu Hassan said a steel grid would be installed around

the driver's seat to separate him from the blast. Mr. Burro said he had not been particularly convinced by this.

"They told me maybe I will live, maybe I will die," recalled Mr. Burro. "They did not specify my destiny."

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The Training Begins

Before Mr. Burro could be sent to his destiny, however, Abu Hassan apparently felt he needed preparation in certain fields. To begin with, Mr. Burro did not have a driver's license and had apparently never driven a car.

Abu Hassan arranged for two days of driving lessons around the southern suburbs. "They instructed me how to drive a car in Beirut," explained Mr. Burro. "It was a Mercedes."

But Abu Hassan was apparently more concerned about Mr. Burro's lack of religious convictions — the fact that he said he occasionally ate pork and had gone to the Shiite prayer center only five times in his life. Moslems are supposed to pray five times a day and never eat pork.

Abu Hassan put Mr. Burro in touch with some local Shiite religious leaders, seemingly to instill in him some religious zeal. His first meeting was with a local Shiite religious figure by the name of Haj Ali Kamal Mari. Mr. Burro described the session this way:

"Abu Hassan took me to Ali. He gave me religious lessons. One lesson was that when a martyr dies he doesn't feel death. He said to me: 'You won't feel death. You will continue to live. You don't feel death. You can die but you don't feel death.'

"He said: 'After the death it's not really death. You will meet all of your brothers, the martyrs, and you will live together in paradise.' He said: 'In this world there is nothing. There is no reason for living.'"

'I Have Not Seen Anything'

Mr. Burro apparently was not put at ease by Haj Ali. He said he told the religious leader after the lesson: "But I have not seen anything from my life yet."

To which he quoted Haj Ali as replying, "Well, this worldly life is nothing compared to paradise."

After the first class with Haj Ali, Mr. Burro said, he went back to Abu Hassan's office. Abu Hassan "questioned me about my nerves and other questions about prayer," the youth said. "I said to him, 'Look, what is this?' So they took me back to Haj Ali for another religious lesson."

Mr. Burro indicated that Abu Hassan had told him that this was a "holy mission" and that only someone who was holy and pure could carry it out. Haj Ali apparently promised to give him a clean slate.

Abu Hassan then sent him to a second, more prominent religious leader, Sheikh Hassan Tred.

Mr. Burro described their meeting, saying: "I told him, 'I am going to do an operation and I might live or die in it.' He said, 'Fine.'"

Prayers Are Promised

Mr. Burro said he and the sheik had written a contract of sorts in which the sheik agreed to "pay someone to pray

for me for two years after my death."

This practice, known as "shafaa," is well known in Shiite Islam. Since Shiite religious leaders are believed to have a special link with God, if a sheik promises that on top of all his blessings he is going to endow someone with the authority to pray for a person's soul, it means that the person's memory will remain in the heart of his people and that the prayers will also be a constant reminder of the person's existence to God himself. It is not like the Kaddish in Judaism, in which loved ones accept a death by extolling the greatness and omnipotence of God. Instead, it serves as a reminder to God of the person, what he did in this world and the reward that should come to him in the afterlife.

Mr. Burro was not impressed.

"I did not benefit from these religious lessons," he said with slight disdain. "In my heart, I was not convinced."

At this point, Israel was beginning its withdrawal from southern Lebanon, the battle there was heating up and there was heated competition between Amal and the Party of God over who would dominate the region.

On Feb. 21, Abu Hassan came with another man, named Nour, to inform Mr. Burro that his day had come, the youth said. Nour, it seems, was a senior intelligence operative in the Amal security apparatus. It was apparently his job to arrange for the exploding car and to get it to the driver.

Links to Foreign Intelligence

Although there is no direct evidence, it is likely that these Amal security men had links to intelligence agents from Syria or even Iran. Syria is known to have a variety of intelligence branches operating out of West Beirut, maintaining close contact with the local militias and helping to coordinate their anti-Israeli operations in southern Lebanon. Western diplomats in Lebanon said, Syrian, Iranian and Libyan intelligence, in particular, are important suppliers of explosives, detonators and other material, according to Western diplomats.

"They asked me if I was ready to go," Mr. Burro said. "I told them that I am not ready. I said, 'No, no, not today.'"

Abu Hassan and Nour, Mr. Burro said, decided to give him until the next day, apparently recognizing his nervousness.

"They came a second day and told me to come to the office of the Amal civil defense," said Mr. Burro. "I told them, 'But I have not yet seen my mother and my brothers.'"

Abu Hassan and Nour were apparently not about to let Mr. Burro engage in any goodbyes. They took him to the civil defense office, he said, and there the plan for the suicide mission began to be put into effect.

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The Mission

From the Amal civil defense office, Mr. Burro said, two cars set off for the trip to southern Lebanon. Mr. Burro rode in a Volvo with two men named Abu Ali and Khudur, whom he had not previously met, he said. In the lead car, a Mazda, he said, were Nour and a man named Malik.

According to his account, they drove in one day from Beirut to Sidon and then to Zrariye, a small Shiite village between Sidon and Tyre. It was being used as an advance staging post by Amal for operations against Israeli forces. Israeli troops raided the village on March 11, killing 34 people described as Shiite guerrillas.

On the drive, Mr. Burro said, he was informed of his target. He was told, he said, to drive the suicide car at the Israeli military command headquarters for the western and central sectors of southern Lebanon, which was situated on a hilltop in a rundown former Lebanese Army barracks on the outskirts of Nabatiye.

About 100 Israeli soldiers worked at the headquarters on a daily basis before it was evacuated last Thursday in the Israeli pullout from Nabatiye.

If he could not reach the headquarters, Mr. Burro said, he was to blow up the car next to an Israeli Army convoy or patrol.

'I Should Not Be Afraid'

"They said the car would have 400 kilograms of TNT inside it and that it would destroy all the homes and people in a radius of two square kilometers," said Mr. Burro. "They said I should not be frightened by this prospect. If I saw civilians beside me or behind me, I should not be afraid. I should just go on. They told me, 'Don't be afraid' to blow up the car."

In Zrariye, the cars stopped and Nour and Malik had a conversation at the side of the road in which Nour provided details about the car bomb, Mr. Burro said.

"I never saw the exploding car," said Mr. Burro. "I just heard them

talking about it. They said there was a button on the left of the steering wheel and a button on the right. The one on the right was for operating and the one on the left for exploding. They had not given me any instructions about the car yet. I just heard Nour and Malik talking about it. I was on the side. He said it was an American car."

According to Israeli military sources, some of the cars used for suicide bombings in Lebanon have had two buttons. One is pushed when the driver gets into the car, and it insures the bomb will explode if the car is turned off at any time. This guarantees that the driver will not back out at the last minute. The button on the left gives the driver the manual ability to detonate the bomb at the right time.

Other car bombs, such as the one used against the American marines in 1983, are believed to have been detonated by a remote control radio signal by someone nearby so there would be no problem if the driver lost his nerve or was shot at.

The Group Splits Up

In Zrariye, the group split up. Nour, Abu Ali and Khudur were to stay in Zrariye, while Malik and Mr. Burro were to drive together to Sir el Gharbiye, a small village farther inland.

Mr. Burro recalled their goodbyes.

"They kissed me," said Mr. Burro. "They wished me that, God willing, I would have a blessed martyrdom, that I wouldn't feel death. They said, 'God willing, you will live in paradise and meet all your friends.' They told me, 'Don't be afraid.' I was not believing the whole thing. I was just not thinking about the whole thing."

Mr. Burro and Malik then took off for the village, where they were to go to the home of a local Amal contact, Mr. Burro said. They arrived after dark.

Malik told Mr. Burro to sleep there and that he would pick him up the next morning at 6:30, the youth said. But the rendezvous would not take place.

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An Unexpected Search

Shortly after dawn that next morning, Feb. 23, the Israeli Army launched a search operation in Sir el Gharbiye, which is in the area of southern Lebanon from which they had withdrawn a few days earlier.

"A boy knocked on the door," Mr. Burro recalled, "and said, 'The Israeli Army is surrounding the town. Go, run away from here.'"

At first, Mr. Burro said, he started running with a group of young men from the village, some of whom were gunned down. Mr. Burro said he had managed to duck into someone's house.

"I found a lady with her daughter," he said. "I said, 'Hello, let me just stay a moment with you.' There was a lot of shelling and Israeli troops all around."

"They came to the house," he said, "and asked me where I was from. I said, 'I am from Beirut.' They said, 'Give us your ID.' They took me to the school."

"In the school there was a room for interrogation. They asked me when I had come, and I told them, 'Yesterday.' They put me in the middle of the room and they were interrogating me, looking at me — and here I am in Tel Aviv."

In their search of Sir el Gharbiye, Israeli troops discovered a car already rigged for a suicide bombing, according to Israeli military sources. Whether it was the one Mr. Burro was meant to drive is not clear.

Last Tuesday, a 16-year-old girl drove an exploding car into an Israeli checkpoint along the Awali River at

Bater el-Shuf, killing herself and two Israeli soldiers. The next day, a film was released in West Beirut — and later broadcast on Syrian television — of what was described as an interview with the 16-year-old driver shortly before her mission.

The film showed a dark-haired girl, Sana Mheidleh, appealing to other youths of southern Lebanon to follow her example.

What was striking from the film was the absence of religious polemics, the fact that she was wearing a red beret often worn by Lebanese leftist militias and that she appeared to be sitting below a sign of the Syrian National Socialist Party, a leftist Lebanese militia that takes its orders from Damascus. Miss Mheidleh said she was "happy to give my life for Hafez al-Assad," the Syrian President.

Like Mr. Burro, Miss Mheidleh said she had not told her parents what she was about to do, and in the film she made a somewhat sorrowful apology to her mother and father for not being

able to say goodbye.

Given all this, and the rather rehearsed nature of her statements — she appeared to be reading from a board next to the camera — it seems likely that she too was a secular young person recruited by unidentified agents on the basis of her psychological profile.

One thing seems certain — that Miss Mheidleh, like Mr. Burro, was working for professionals.

No one seemed to want to kill himself less than Mohammed Mahmoud Burro. While he certainly does not enjoy being an Israeli captive, his happiness at simply being alive today is palpable. When asked if he felt angry that his mission had been foiled, he smiled broadly and said, "On the contrary, I feel great."

Asked if he would like to say anything to his family, which he probably will not see for some time, Mr. Burro thought for a moment and then said softly:

"Tell them that I am Mohammed and I am born anew."